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ABSTRACT

As part of ongoing research into rural school improvement, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) at the request of its Rural Advisory Council set out to find, examine, and profile exemplary, successful school improvement programs in rural schools and districts in the upper Midwest. This paper is a summary of the first year results of a study that came from this initiative. In it are profiled four rural schools and the exemplary educational initiatives they have successfully installed and carried out. Federal Hocking High School (Ohio) adopted the "Coalition of Essential Schools" (CES) and "Expeditionary Learning-Outward Bound" programs and implemented block scheduling, multifunctional lunch periods, daily advisory meetings, team teaching, graduation portfolios, senior projects, and community internships. Dawson-Bryant Elementary school, a K-5 school in southeastern Ohio, adopted the "Success for All" model, which focuses on reading instruction, and invested in information technology equipment, wiring, training, and software. Northport K-12 school in Michigan also adopted the CES model, but its signature initiative was the senior projects program. West Liberty Elementary school (Iowa), a PreK-2 school, installed the first two-way Spanish/English immersion program in the state. Elements of success common to all these efforts were a school culture that was amenable to change and experimentation and that emphasized continuous improvement, reflection, and self-analysis; attention to principles of change; solid research, in some cases up to a year of research; local adaptation; and additional resources. Elements of rurality that assisted these reforms were eligibility for special consideration by grant-making agencies; small size, which enabled quick action; a sense of rural insecurity that acted as a motivator; and the integration of school and community. An appendix contains the data collection guide and rubrics. (Contains 25 references.) (TD)

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How on Earth Did You Hear About Us? A Study of Exemplary Rural School Practices in the Upper Midwest

Part I: The Study

Though many decry the failure of educational research to be oriented toward practical application (Berliner, et. al., 1997), with help many schools and districts have had success translating this research into effective improvement initiatives. Yet frequently these successes remain localized because they are not systematically profiled or promoted (McDermott, 1997). Thus schools and districts hungry for information and "how-to" advice rarely are able to take advantage of the wisdom and experience of those who are implementing these successful programs (Elmore, 1996). Yet, those with the wisdom and experience often are never heard because they have few avenues for sharing with their colleagues or do not know about avenues that would enable them to reach a broader audience. This situation seems particularly acute among rural schools in the upper Midwest where isolation and remoteness are typical and cross-district sharing rarely happens (D'Amico, et. al., 1995).

Background and Introduction

With this as backdrop, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) at the request of its Rural Advisory Council (RAC) set out to find, examine, and profile exemplary, successful school improvement programs in rural schools and districts in the upper Midwest. The RAC saw this effort as a way to:

- Determine the extent to which rural schools and districts in this part of the country are "ahead of the curve" in their implementation of innovative improvement initiatives
- "Spread the word" about these initiatives to rural districts across the region
- Help all rural districts better understand what unique conditions and key processes underlie the success of these school improvement programs
- Provide rural districts with important information and guidance -- as gleaned from the experiences of those that had gone through it -- to help them carry out school improvement.

This paper is a summary of the first year results of a study that came from this initiative. In it are profiled four rural schools and the exemplary educational initiatives they have successfully installed and carried out. Additionally, we look at the life cycle of these initiatives and how key events in the cycle contributed to success. Finally, we briefly discuss important

contextual factors that helped these schools succeed with special attention to ones that are uniquely rural.

Objectives and Outcome

The study NCREL undertook was designed to examine rural schools or districts that had educationally effective school improvement initiatives in place. NCREL set the following objectives:

- To identify, as sites for investigation, rural schools and districts displaying established, effective school improvement initiatives
- To examine how the improvement initiatives in these school and district sites came to be established and successful
- To profile key contextual, organizational, procedural, programmatic, and fiscal characteristics that contributed to the initiative's success
- To describe how (or whether) the schools' and districts' rural contexts exerted a unique influence on the success of their improvement initiatives.

The outcome of the study will be a series of readable, journalistic profiles of rural schools or districts that have implemented successful, "exemplary" school improvement practices. In these profiles will be outlines of the practices themselves; fairly detailed descriptions of their life cycle (from pre-planning through institutionalization); discussion of the key elements and events that contributed to their success during that life cycle; and some suggestions for those wanting to launch similar initiatives. These profiles are currently in the planning stages. They will be completed as soon as the study's data summaries can be translated into a practitioner-friendly product.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Because of its objectives and the nature of its intended outcome, the study combines *journalistic and narrative methodologies* (e.g., Bruner, 1987, Clendenin & Connelly, 1996, Richardson, 1994). To account for the wide diversity of locales, practices, and the like encountered, the study also includes an overlay of *grounded theory* (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967, Guba, 1981). This enabled NCREL to incorporate unanticipated factors, which became important as inquiries unfolded.

Theoretically, the study draws from several literature bases.

The *educational change literature* (e.g., Corbett, et. al., 1984; Bolman & Deal, 1993) has long suggested that educational innovations follow a life cycle consisting of fairly well defined stages from planning to introduction to implementation and finally to institutionalization. Further, authors writing about this life cycle posit that there are a number of key events occurring in each stage that, unless they run smoothly can prevent the innovation from reaching the next stage.

The *literature dealing with comprehensive school reform* (e.g., Cuban, 1992; McDermott, 1997; Peterson, et. al, 1996) tends to reinforce the change literature, but many authors who have examined the change process from this perspective would suggest additional stages to the life cycle. They would include, for instance, stages where needs are identified (or gaps noted) and alternative interventions investigated. They also note that there should be recognition of numerous activities that go before implementation planning: for example, gaining needed buy-in (or marketing); creating shared visions, and assembling an operational planning team.

In *literature describing the influence of context* on change and innovation (e.g., Corbett, et. al., 1984, Fullan, 2000, and Hatch, 1998) authors point to critical factors that have varying degrees of impact on the change cycle. These can act as barriers to or enablers of success as key events in the cycle play out. Among them are organizational and cultural factors (e.g., resource allocations), factors related to the nature of the change itself (e.g., the stresses on implementers' time and energy), personnel factors (e.g., individual motivation), and factors associated with unintended short-and-long-term effects (e.g., test score dips and community disapproval). The *literature examining the rural context* (e.g., Flora, et. al., 1992, Hobbs, 1994, and Miller, 1991) sees these factors and a few others (e.g., community sociology, culture, economics, and geographic location) as playing an even greater role on the change cycle in rural schools.

Site Selection

To keep the site identification and selection process manageable and to make sure the results would be useful to rural educators, NCREL focused on finding sites with initiatives in high priority areas of rural school improvement. In other words, we were looking for initiatives in areas where rural educators felt they needed help. We also wanted to be sure we chose improvement areas where there were likely to be rural schools actually doing "good things." Otherwise we would have nothing to investigate. With the RAC members acting as sounding boards NCREL settled on the following areas:

- Incorporating high end technology
- Using a mix of conventional and non-conventional testing strategies
- Installing unique staff recruitment and retention mechanisms
- Creating opportunities that help staff learn leadership skills
- Applying novel approaches to resource acquisition, management, and allocation;
- Building programs and organizational support systems that result in equitable educational opportunities for all students

NCREL also worked with members of the RAC to identify potential sites for investigation. As sites were recommended, NCREL conducted short telephone interviews with key staff (usually superintendents, principals, lead teachers, program coordinators, or the like) to get a better understanding of the initiative, some details about its implementation, and the nature of its

impact. Specifically, NCREL wanted to determine whether the initiative warranted visiting the site. Therefore, the following questions were asked about the initiatives:

- Is it occurring in a K-12 rural school district?
- Is it based on research?
- Is it data driven (that is, responding to well-defined and documented needs)?
- Has it been operating long enough to show impact on student outcomes (test scores and other measures)?
- Is it showing impact on those outcomes?
- Is there congruence between program goals and program outcomes (is there a definite program plan)?
- Is it operating throughout the system (that is, occurring in more than a single classroom) or on its way to spreading throughout the system?

Data Collection

Once it was ascertained that the site was one that should be visited, site researchers were assigned. They spent between two and four days on site collecting information by interviewing a broad range of individuals; for instance, teachers, administrators, parents, students, and various community members. In cases where the improvement initiatives involved nationally validated programs, site researchers also interviewed representatives of these programs. In addition, researchers observed key events that had been recommended by informants as appropriate. Among these were meetings, classroom interactions, and planning sessions. Finally, they reviewed documents and print materials related to the initiatives – from meeting notes to curriculum materials, student products, and grant proposals.

The primary goal of these data collection activities was not only to broaden and deepen our understanding of the initiative as it evolved at the site. An additional goal however, was to flesh out our knowledge of the local organizational, cultural, and political contexts and the role these diverse contexts might play in this evolution. Protocols were used for data collection during both the telephone interviews and the site visits (see Appendix).

Part II: The Sites

The four rural places chosen for the study's first site visits are in three different Midwestern states and each is as different from the others as they can be. Stewart and Deering are in southern Ohio. West Liberty is in east central Iowa and Northport is at the northwest tip of Michigan.

Stewart, Ohio

Stewart is in an area of rolling hills in Meigs County where the Hocking River and Federal Creek form a watershed. In the southeastern portion of the state

not far from West Virginia, it is an area rich in history that once included stops on the Underground Railroad. Although most definitely a rural community, Stewart is close to the Parkersburg-Marietta metropolitan area and a short fifteen-minute drive from Athens where Ohio University is located. There also is a major, regional shopping mall in Athens. Stewart is almost entirely a residential community with most residents commuting to their jobs in manufacturing plants in nearby towns or in Athens or even West Virginia.

Although geographically Stewart is probably an Appalachian town, its families do not fit the Appalachian stereotype either economically or culturally. They are not affluent, but certainly not poor. Most are blue-collar workers; however, quite a few are professionals working in Athens or the Parkersburg- Marietta metro area. Yet approximately a third of Stewart's school-age children qualify for free or reduced meals.

Deering, Ohio

Deering is a very small town tucked inside the Wayne National Forest in Wayne County. It sits just a few miles from a point where both Kentucky and West Virginia border Ohio. Deering is only about a hundred miles southwest of Stewart, but economically and culturally it is very far away.

More typically Appalachian than Stewart, Deering's economy has been on a downward spiral for a while. Industries have closed, businesses have shut down, unemployment rates have risen, and the average family income has dropped dramatically. Many have left the area in search of jobs. Those who have stayed, as well as the few who have come in to the community, are mostly poor. Deering is almost dead last in Ohio in terms of per pupil wealth; seventy percent of the school-age children qualify for free or reduced meals. The deflation of the economy here is about the first thing Deering's residents describe.

Northport, Michigan

Northport is about a ten-hour drive from Deering, traveling north and west along interstates, state highways, and eventually county roads. It is almost as far north as one can go on the Leelanau Peninsula that sticks out between Lake Michigan and the Grand Traverse Bay. It is thirty-five miles from one of northern Michigan's most popular tourist destinations, Traverse City, which also is one of the largest cities in the northern part of the state.

Northport, itself, has become a very popular tourist destination with a large number of summer-only residents. The population of this small boating, fishing, and water resort community can reach several thousand in the summer even though there are only about six hundred permanent, year-round residents. In part because of this huge influx of tourists and summer residents, Northport is affluent – even by resort community standards – with trendy restaurants, art galleries, and coffee bars. Some of the wealthiest families in the United States own summer homes in Northport.

Yet most Northport families would be considered middle class or lower middle class economically. And there are some living both in the community and nearby who are far from even middle class – migrant workers, watermen, and day laborers. More than a quarter of the community's school-age children qualify for free or reduced meals. There also is a Native American population living on a small reservation close to Northport. Most of the native people from this reservation work at the tribal casino complex on their land.

An interesting and rather unique aspect of Northport is the fact that its residents seem to be very well educated, even urbane. More importantly, their world- view seems much more progressive than one would expect to find in a rural community. As will be seen, this rural cultural anomaly plays a role in how the citizens of Northport interact with their school.

West Liberty, Iowa

West Liberty sits close by the Mississippi River a nine-and-a-half hour drive south and west of Northport. Although it is a rural community with a population of about three thousand, West Liberty is not remote. It is fourteen miles from Iowa City, home of the University of Iowa, and ten miles away from Muscatine, a fairly large city on the river's edge.

West Liberty's economy is agriculture-based. Farms surround it and there is a fairly large meat-processing cooperative just off the main square. There also are a few stores in town and nearby selling farm machinery, seed, and supplies. These, along with the school district, are the major employers, but a number of West Liberty residents work in Muscatine and Iowa City. Some see the town as a bedroom community to these larger cities. Lastly, there are a group of small businesses in the center of West Liberty including restaurants, grocery stores, gas stations, mini-marts, and the like.

Quite unexpectedly, there is a large Hispanic population living in and around West Liberty. It is a growing population that first came to the town from Mexico and the American Southwest to work in a poultry-processing plant that opened over a decade ago. Many of the town's Hispanic citizens have long ago left behind work at the processing plant and have solidly established themselves economically and as a local cultural presence. The small, four-square-block business district has three Mexican restaurants (all open seven days a week for lunch and dinner and quite popular with both Latinos and Anglos) and a Mexican grocery store. The growth in numbers (now accounting for between thirty and forty percent of the population) and in cultural and social influence of this Hispanic population has had an important impact on West Liberty.

Part III: The School Districts and Schools

The schools and districts we visited in these communities are as different from one another as are the communities. The number of buildings and the grade configurations in them reflect three fairly common Midwestern rural school phenomena. The first is that most rural schools in this region are old,

typically the newest were built thirty or more years ago. The second is that rural student populations in this region are growing after about a decade and a half of decline. And the third is that – because of numbers one and two – Midwestern rural communities have some novel school building architecture and novel ways of combining grades in a school.

Federal Hocking

The school district serving Stewart, Ohio is the Federal Hocking Local School District. In the district there are four schools in three buildings: two elementary buildings and a single building housing both Stewart's middle and high school students. The elementary buildings are at either end of the district. The middle school/high school building is more or less in the center of the district. NCREL was most interested in the improvement initiatives underway at the high school.

Federal Hocking High School was renovated in 1997 when the middle school was built onto it. It is located at one end of the long, one-story building housing both schools. It is modern, clean, and welcoming with open, uncluttered hallways. Two unique features of the building strike a visitor: an open area full of student artwork not far from the main entrance and an attractive performance area along one side of the cafeteria.

Federal Hocking is a modest-sized high school with just over three hundred and fifty students enrolled. The number of teachers, thirty-one working across grade levels, makes the student-teacher ratio a very good one at about eleven to one. There also is a principal and an assistant principal serving as the administrative staff. The school is a teacher -training site for Ohio University, moreover, and frequently teaching fellows or student teachers work there. So even though there are no paraprofessionals, there is a lot of staff on hand in this high school.

Dawson-Bryant

Dawson-Bryant Local School District serves the children of Deering, Ohio as well as children from a number of other communities like Ironton, Waterloo, and Coal Grove. The district offices are in Ironton. There are three buildings in the district: a recently consolidated elementary school, a middle school, and a high school. They all are named Dawson-Bryant. The improvement initiatives at the elementary school were the focus of NCREL's site visit.

The Dawson-Bryant Elementary School, formerly Deering Elementary School, is the product of a 1996 consolidation that joined the three community schools of Deering, Andis, and Monitor. It is located in the Wayne National Forest and this location has a negative impact on the school's – and the district's -- revenue stream. The land is non-taxable; therefore it does not generate any revenue for the school.

Formerly a K-8 building, the school now serves six hundred-fifty K-5 students. It boasts a new wing built partly to accommodate the incoming students from the other schools. The school is clean and neat and this newer section gives

it a feeling of being modern even though most of it is pretty old. There are forty-five teachers, two administrators (a principal and a dean of students), and anywhere from ten to fifteen volunteer aids staffing the building.

Northport

The Northport School District is a one building district with all the students housed in one K-12 facility. In it are elementary, middle, and high school sections, but between classes and before and after school, the students mingle with little regard to grade level. The school is probably thirty or forty years old, but it has been added to and modernized in parts. Some sections – notably the library – are "open" areas without walls or doors.

There is a high level of up-to-date technology in lab and classroom settings throughout the building. The school is very well maintained and clean, even the multipurpose room that serves as both cafeteria and gym. The district superintendent's office is in the Northport School right next door to the principal's office.

There are 346 students enrolled at Northport and the school is very well staffed with twenty-seven teachers, six part-time aides, two full-time aides, a counselor, a social worker, a part-time tutor for migrant students, and a full-time Title IX coordinator. The principal is the school's only administrator; but because her office is in the building, the superintendent frequently takes care of some school administrative tasks. The principal sometimes reciprocates by doing district tasks.

West Liberty

The West Liberty Community School District serves the students living in West Liberty as well youngsters living on the many farms that surround the town. There are three schools in the district: one houses Pre K through second grade; one with a grade three through six portion and a grade seven and eight portion; and a grade nine through grade twelve high school. NCREL's interest lay largely in the improvement initiative West Liberty is implementing for the children at the Pre K – 2 levels.

The Pre K – 2 building is known as the West Liberty Elementary School even though there are elementary grades at what they call the middle school. It has a very old section, dating from the turn of the century, and several more recent add-ons. It is clean and well maintained. The building also is remarkably well equipped with high-end technology. There are three or four multimedia computers in each classroom and a computer lab. In addition, there is an Internet connection in each classroom.

Three hundred twenty-seven students attend the elementary school; almost half are in Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Fifteen teachers, six aides, and the principal make up the full-time staff at West Liberty Elementary. In addition, the district employs two bilingual aides who "float" from school to school. They also spend time at the elementary school.

Part IV: The School Improvement Initiatives

As does school improvement everywhere, the improvement initiatives in these four rural schools reflect the needs, culture, and world-view of the communities where they are located. Thus they are diverse in their focal points as well as in the way they were introduced, implemented, and institutionalized.

Federal Hocking: Restructuring Time to Restructure a School's Environment

Even though Federal Hocking's student to teacher ratio would seem to be better than in many high schools, in the early 1990's, the staff did not feel this way. The structure of the school schedule actually had most teachers working with as many as two hundred students per day. Given this situation they began to feel overwhelmed and like they were losing touch with students as individuals. Students likewise seemed to feel disconnected from staff and they began to act out their dissatisfaction with this lack of personal contact. As a result, truancy, tardiness, detention, and demerit slips took the place of substantive, helpful student/teacher interactions. An increase in the number and severity of the school's discipline problems came to a head during the 1990-91 school year. The principal could not keep up with student discipline problems, and maintaining classroom order became the major priority for teachers.

Partly because they felt overwhelmed with maintaining order and partly because their teaching schedule was jam packed -- as many as three or four class preparations and seven class periods per day -- efficient teaching took the place of effective teaching. Classroom activities became less and less engaging and creative while some teachers even avoided assigning essays because they did not have enough time to correct them. Adding to the tandem deterioration of both engaged learning in the classroom and orderly school environment were the large study halls: most students were scheduled for one or two per day, some had more. Discipline was especially troublesome during these study halls and students began slipping out of them to vandalize lockers.

Site visitors from the Ohio Department of Education reported an atmosphere of "misery" permeating Federal Hocking High School. Neither many students nor many teachers felt school was a rewarding experience. They had virtually no school pride and most everyone felt they had no control over the situation.

Efforts to change this atmosphere and its root causes at Federal Hocking High School began when a new principal was brought on board. Shortly after the 1992-93 school year was under way, he began to meet on a one-to-one basis with teachers to determine what they thought was the purpose for school, what goals they had for their classes, and what were their professional goals. With this information as a basis, he began a round of department meetings where he learned that lack of time was their most important concern. Teachers felt their work was not respected because they were not given sufficient time to do it well. This concern became the

cornerstone of the Federal Hocking school improvement initiative and addressing it became the strategy for implementing the initiative.

A series of in-service meetings and community forums were scheduled to consider not only the time issue but also five key strategic planning issues:

- What do we do well at Federal Hocking High School?
- How could we do more of what we are already doing well?
- What do we not do so well?
- How could we change what we are not doing well?
- What resources do we need to achieve our goals?

From these sessions came a new school mission statement and agreement on three significant changes intended to improve the school's environment and the quality of instruction. They were:

- The daily schedule would move from eight periods per day to a four-period block schedule
- The school would operate two 18-week semesters
- Advisory groups would replace homerooms and every adult in the building would meet with a small group of students on a regular basis.

This was the start of Federal Hocking's whole-school comprehensive improvement initiative that today features high levels of staff involvement in decision-making, a culture of continuous improvement, solid support in the form of professional development and technical assistance, and the following key program elements:

Four-Block Schedule – Each day is divided in to four blocks running eighty minutes each. For some classes such as music, foreign language and art, however, the last block of the day is divided into two parts.

Multifunctional Lunch Periods -- To take the place of the dysfunctional study halls, there is a one-hour lunch between blocks two and three for all students. Teachers are available to assist students with work, and the computer lab, library, gym, agriculture, shop, and tutoring areas are open for supervised student use. Meetings are scheduled during lunch, so groups no longer interrupt classes. Some students who have shown poor study habits are assigned to tutoring areas at noon, but most have the opportunity to be in control of the way they will spend their time. And of course, the lunch period offers time for socializing as well as working and eating.

Daily Advisory Meetings – Monday through Thursday advisories are short sessions at the beginning of the day. On Friday, however, the sessions last for an hour. These sessions go way beyond providing a convenient time for taking attendance and reading announcements, they serve a solid instructional purpose as well, for example:

- An opportunity to work on graduation portfolios

- A chance for teacher/advisors to review students' accomplishments and credit status and to help them stay in touch with what they have left to do to graduate
- A time to help students develop post-high school plans by helping them plan college and work site visits
- An opportunity to discuss issues that are not a part of the regular curriculum.

Students are assigned to the same advisor for all four years of high school, so advisors and advisees get to know each other well. Advisors stay informed because they receive copies of their advisees' report cards and credit deficiency notices. Both professional and support staff serve as advisors.

Team Teaching – Teachers work together in a variety of ways to make instruction meaningful and teaching creative. Teachers may take turns teaching a class, or merely plan and work together. All freshmen and sophomores take English and social studies in back-to-back blocks, but other partnerships between departments have developed over the years.

Graduation Portfolios and Senior Projects – In addition to passing state proficiency tests, Federal Hocking High School students are required to show what they have learned. Graduation portfolios include three parts: a career folder, a citizenship folder, and a "skills for lifelong learning" folder. Students also complete individual projects in a required one-semester class offered during senior year which is described as "...a capstone to [the] high school experience." Elements incorporated in senior projects include: topics which reflect students' own interests, research, creation of projects which are far more than research papers, and real audiences for the students' work.

Community Internships – Internships provide opportunities for students to do meaningful work with area businesses and agencies over the course of a semester, and to learn about possible careers. A full-time internship coordinator oversees the program.

Adoption of Comprehensive School Reform (CSR) Models – Federal Hocking High School staff have adopted the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES) and Expeditionary Learning – Outward Bound (ELOB) programs. They have attended training workshops and conferences sponsored by these CSR programs. In addition, they receive support through publications and participation in regional support groups for these programs. CES in particular has provided the high school with important principles that guide much of their school reform.

Staff and students at Federal Hocking High School agree that they have come a long way from the "atmosphere of misery" the state visitors described. They attack their school days with energy and unlike in the past, few are unhappy about being at Federal Hocking. Students and staff alike feel a sense of control and everyone has opportunities for active involvement. Perhaps most significantly, there are fewer instances of tardiness and because of this, the percentage of time students spend doing real work in

class has risen. As a result more students are passing state proficiency tests and more students are on the academic honor roll.

Dawson-Bryant: Success Through *Success for All*

Dawson-Bryant is a consolidated school serving approximately six hundred-fifty students from the southeastern Ohio communities of Deering, Andis, and Monitor. It is a poor school serving poor communities in a poor part of the state. And like many poor schools in America, Dawson-Bryant's students' economic situation seems to have had an impact on their academic situation. The school is ranked number 607 (out of 611 schools) in terms of student wealth with a shrinking economy making matters worse. Therefore, it came as little surprise to those educating the children in these communities that their students ranked very poorly in terms of standard achievement measures.

Even before consolidation, the teachers and administrators working with the students from Deering, Andis, and Monitor recognized that low achievement was the norm and worse yet, it was dropping. Standardized test scores were among the lowest in the state and youngsters routinely were retained at grade level simply because they routinely failed. Moreover, more and more children seemed to be entering kindergarten with major language development deficiencies. Lastly, the staff from these schools saw an erosion of support from their students' parents who either did not understanding how to provide it or did not have the time to become involved in their children's education. It seemed obvious to these educators that major program modifications were called for, yet they were (and are) a poor school serving poor families in poor communities.

Things began to change in 1993 when the district applied for and won a state Venture Capital grant. With the grant funds, the staff from the three elementary schools that eventually consolidated to form Dawson-Bryant investigated and overwhelmingly voted to adopt *Success for All (SFA)*, a research-proven model school reform program focused on reading instruction. With this decision, they joined the first group of a hundred schools to adopt this program. In 1995 the schools were named visitation sites (where others interested in SFA could see it in action).

What appealed to the elementary teachers from the three schools was the fact that *Success for All* had a solid track record boosting reading achievement in schools across the United States, many of them serving the kind of at-risk, disadvantaged, and low-achieving children as their schools were serving. *Success for All* also seemed like a good fit for the schools' particular needs. The program emphasizes prevention, early, intensive intervention for students beginning to have academic difficulties. It includes an extensive professional development component and ongoing technical, implementation assistance as well. In addition to a curriculum, which includes phonics, meaning-focused instruction, cooperative learning, and curriculum-based assessment, *Success for All* includes an emphasis on active family involvement and support.

Specifically, for Dawson-Bryant, *Success for All* includes:

- A 90-minute reading and language arts block
- Reading tutors for students in grades 1–3 who have difficulty keeping up with their reading groups
- Reading assessments at eight-week intervals
- Cooperative learning – including work as partners and as members of teams
- Early learning programs – kindergarten students experience SFA activities along with other language development work
- Conflict resolution education
- Family support
- Site facilitators to oversee *SFA* implementation
- Training for all teachers, including workshops and follow-up visits by *SFA* trainers.

Equally important, the introduction of *Success for All* at the three schools that would soon become Dawson-Bryant served as what one staff person called "an igniter" for additional improvement initiatives. Among them:

- An all-day, every day kindergarten established in 1995 to help boost the development of students entering the system
- Parent involvement that goes beyond what is required for *SFA* and includes parenting classes, an active parent-school organization, and extensive volunteering
- School-community partnerships with local businesses, churches, and over eighteen county and local social service agencies such as Shawnee Mental Health Services
- Introduction of *World Lab,* the science and social studies component of *Success for All.*

Parenthetically, fairly early in their move to install *Success for All*, the staff of the three schools that would become Dawson-Bryant realized that technology could help them and their students improve important achievement outcomes. Therefore, the district sponsored a parallel effort to make technology available to students and teachers. Flushed with the success experienced when collaboration with Ohio University and several businesses enabled the creation of a high tech environment in one third-grade classroom in the Deering School (called the Appalachian Distance Learning Project), the district took advantage of a number of opportunities to enhance their use of technology. In 1994 the school district received a grant from GTE, which allowed teachers, parents and administrators to develop a comprehensive technology plan. That was followed by grants from School Net and School Net Plus, state technology initiatives that provided wiring and equipment for use in classrooms as well as software and training for teachers. By one estimate at least $400,000 in grant money went toward technology at Dawson-Bryant.

Northport: A Coalition of Initiatives Under a *Coalition of Essential Schools* Umbrella

Northport School was one of the earliest adopters of the *Coalition of Essential Schools* approach to school improvement in the country. The notion of becoming a *Coalition* school was first introduced in 1993; the *Coalition* approach was formally adopted a year later; and the school received official *Coalition* certification in 1995. Interestingly however, becoming a *Coalition* school was not Northport's first improvement initiative, nor is being a *Coalition* school what they are most well known for. As a practical consideration for the staff, students, and parents of Northport School, the *Coalition of Essential Schools* is a convenient tent under which to assemble and organize a variety of improvement efforts. It is the Senior Projects program that is their signature improvement initiative.

The Senior Projects program is at base an alternative assessment initiative stressing performance based, interdisciplinary projects that seniors are required to complete in order to graduate. The students take the better part of their senior year to complete their projects and are helped along the way by teams of teachers – and sometimes community members with special expertise – acting as guides, mentors, and formative evaluators. The culmination of the senior project is a "performance" during which the student explains the project, describes the processes s/he went through to complete it, and presents the results. The "performance takes place in front of an audience comprised of school staff and sometimes community members. It is a very special and important occasion for all concerned. It also has become the capstone of a student's career at Northport.

The evolution of the Senior Projects program and its eventual integration with the *Coalition of Essential Schools* (and the way other disparate improvement initiatives were collected under the *Coalition* rubric) is a fascinating example of how perception, vision, and necessity came together. It also is a good example of how hard a school community will work together to make sure their students have a valuable, useful educational experience.

In the early 1980s there was a feeling on the part of certain Board of Education members that the Northport graduates were not as well prepared for the rigors of college as their suburban or urban counterparts. For this contingent, variously characterized as the "intellectuals" or the "very knowledgeable", Northport School was providing students with an excellent education, but they were concerned that these students might drop out of college, really for reasons other than their academic preparation. Even though there does not seem to have been any concrete evidence that this concern was justified (i.e., no students actually had dropped out citing poor preparation), it was still a concern. And the "intellectuals" were able to garner strong consensus among the other board members around it.

The superintendent at the time was one of these "intellectuals" and he – along with a couple of board members and teachers – designed and installed the Senior Project program. For them the program would give the students an authentic, thematic experience very much like the ones they would have in

college and presumably provide them better preparation. This has proven to be the case as Northport graduates have all had successful college careers, some in very prestigious universities. It bears repeating though, that there was no solid evidence that this might not have happened even without the Projects. Current administration points out that the school's graduation rate always has been 100 percent and the rate of post-secondary completion nearly as high.

For nearly a decade the Senior Projects program quite successfully met the outcomes intended for it and the program was expanded to include juniors and sophomores who conducted their own projects sort of as rehearsal/preparation for their senior year projects. As the 1980s became the 1990s, however, the state of Michigan, which had long been relaxed as regards local school accreditation, began strongly urging school districts to get accreditation from some external agency. Concomitantly, there developed an interest among key staff and board members to expand the program and make it school-wide. During this time a new superintendent was hired who introduced them to *The Coalition of Essential Schools.* As they became more familiar with it they became enamored with the *Coalition* approach. It offered them a formal program that could serve as an umbrella under which they could place this expansion. It also offered a way to get accreditation from a respected source. Moreover, it fit nicely with the board's educational philosophy and the Senior Project program. It was adopted unanimously a year after it was introduced.

The *Coalition of Essential Schools,* based on the educational philosophies and research of Theodore Sizer and his colleagues, is more of an approach to education than it is a program with specific curricular, instructional, or organizational components. As the literature says, it is designed to "guide" reform rather than as a "blueprint." The *Coalition* has a particular philosophy and ten specific principles that are well explained in its literature (Sizer, 1992).

It is important to emphasize that the *Coalition of Essential Schools* has no particular curriculum component. As long as the principles having to do with curriculum and instruction are reflected, most anything will work. There are really no particular instructional approaches associated with the *Coalition* other than ones that can be derived from the principles. Finally, even though the *Coalition* literature does not prescribe any particular school or classroom organization, the philosophy is based on Sizer's observations that fifty-minute class periods are just not a good way to go.

Even though they subscribe to the *Coalition of Essential Schools* philosophy and have adopted its principles, at Northport they have tailored them to reflect things they believe are important. Thus they have derived their own Belief Statement from the *Coalition* principles. These beliefs as well as sets of student outcomes for each school level seem to be the school's goals. More importantly, the staff has recognized that its stated objective of being a "guide" rather than a "framework" allows them some latitude to interpret the *Coalition of Essential Schools* approach. In short, they believe that as long as the principles are reflected, most anything will work.

At Northport they seem to have made many different things work -- even ones that might seem inconsistent. For example, they have installed a number of additional reforms designed to scaffold their implementation of the *Coalition* principles and support their efforts to expand the Projects program to all grade levels. Among these reforms are:

- *Success for All* and *Roots and Wings*, the research-based school reform programs, which constitute a significant portion of the elementary school curriculum
- Thematic instruction, mastery learning, and cooperative learning approaches
- Block schedules, shared grades, and common planning time for grade level teachers
- Critical friends groups and meetings as the formal basis for all teacher professional development
- Use of state standardized test results as important outcome measures.

It appears that both the Projects program and the *Coalition of Essential Schools* are firmly institutionalized at Northport. The former has maintained itself – even grown – for seventeen years and across three major changes in school and district leadership. Most see only positive results for all concerned. They report that graduating seniors return with high praise for the Projects program and furthermore they firmly believe that doing a project gave them a leg up, providing them with many of the skills and attitudes necessary for being comfortable and successful in college. Staff, administration, and board members also indicate that spreading the Project program to the rest of the grades has been beneficial for students, as well.

Though the *Coalition* implementation has had a less direct effect on students, it seems to have had an enormously positive effect on district staff and the general ambience of the school. They praise its impact on their work life and on what they considered to be important student outcomes. In fact, several staff said that because of the effects of the *Coalition* principles and approaches made the quality of work so attractive, they were willing to wait or work as aides in order to finally get a position in the district. Significantly, understanding of and willingness to work in a *Coalition*-oriented district has become another job qualification. Both the new Superintendent and several newly hired teachers said they were explicitly told this in their interviews. Lastly, during recent contract negotiations, the teachers bargaining unit insisted that *Coalition* principles, approaches, and associated support systems be included in their contract.

West Liberty: A Dual Language Program for a Dual Language Population

West Liberty has installed a two-way, Spanish/English immersion (Dual Language) program, which is the first such program in Iowa. It is designed to teach English-speaking students Spanish and Spanish-speaking students English by having teachers teach all subjects in the core curriculum 50

percent of the time in English and 50 percent of the time in Spanish. According to the district leadership, this program, largely funded by a Federal Title VII grant, has the following five goals:

- Make the curriculum truly accessible to limited English proficient (LEP) students
- Increase the academic achievement of regular and LEP students
- Implement Spanish language instruction in the primary grades
- Develop respectful, cross-cultural relationships
- Provide opportunities for substantial parent involvement by creating home-school partnerships.

At this point the program, which also is partly funded by a state ESL grant, is being implemented in three grades. They are Pre-K, Kindergarten, and first grade with a total of one hundred-twenty students participating. The district, however, plans to expand it to include third and fourth grade. Students will move out of their Dual Language program and into a more traditional English as a Second Language (ESL) program in fifth grade. Staff feels that the literature supports this decision, although they originally based it on practicalities of time and available funds. The program is purely voluntary and parents must request that their children participate. Despite this, participation is rather competitive with far more applications for the program than there is room.

The program reflects research done by Virginia Collier and Wayne Thomas from George Mason University (Collier, 1995, Thomas & Collier, 1997). These authors examined six different approaches to language instruction. They concluded that two-way immersion (dual language) is the most effective approach to meet the inter-related goals of improving Spanish students' proficiency with English while boosting their academic performance (by teaching complicated content in their own language as well as English). They also found the dual language approach is effective for providing Spanish instruction for English-speaking students in the elementary grades. This research was used extensively to design the West Liberty program.

An interesting aspect of this West Liberty version of a Dual Language program is that students may not cycle in. That is, students may only enter the program as Pre-Kindergarteners. The original intention was that the program would cover all grades (K-12) and eventually all West Liberty students would have their instruction 50% Spanish and 50% English, but as noted this plan was changed.

As unexpected as this program is – in a small rural school in eastern Iowa – the motivation for adopting it is grounded in a reality that the district leadership deserve a great deal of credit for recognizing. West Liberty has had a steadily growing Hispanic population over the last decade or so. Increasing numbers of Hispanic workers and their families coming from Mexico and parts of southern Texas and Arizona to work in a fairly large poultry processing plant gave West Liberty one of the fastest growing full-time Hispanic populations in Iowa. As they established themselves financially,

these Hispanic residents also began to establish themselves as a socio-cultural force in the community.

Because most came to be permanent residents and thus brought families with them, the number of Spanish speaking students in the West Liberty schools steadily increased as well, until they now represent 36 percent of the student population. In response, the schools established a comprehensive K-12 ESL program, one of the first in the state. Yet, although they believed this program to be effective, they also began to feel it was inadequate for the Hispanic students' needs. Staff observed that despite their own best efforts, the ESL students continually fell behind the English-speaking students, as curriculum content became more complex (i.e. as they went up in the grades). Their reading of the research convinced them they needed to enhance their existing ESL program to eliminate all barriers preventing the Hispanic students from excelling academically.

As an important aside, there were two parallel situations helping to move the district towards this Dual Language approach. First, there was a growing concern among Hispanic parents that in an effort to "fit in" their children were no longer using the Spanish language routinely. Therefore in the eyes of their families they were losing their knowledge of and respect for their culture. Secondly, there was a contingent of school staff and parents, too, that felt it was important to provide second language instruction to English-speaking students at the elementary level.

In the midst of all this, the school administration saw an opportunity to acquire Federal Title VII money to expand and enhance their ESL initiatives. And so was born West Liberty's Dual Language program.

As one would imagine, this program makes some unique demands on the district's curriculum, the staff's delivery of instruction, and on the staff themselves. The Dual Language curriculum is basically the district's core curriculum arrayed by subject area -- Language Arts, Science, Social Studies – but with Spanish as a second language for students who are English-speakers and English as a second language for Spanish-speakers. None of these curriculum areas is taught as a specific subject, however. The core subjects are integrated and taught thematically and students learn either the Spanish or English language through exposure only; that is, because during 50% of their core subject classes only one of the two languages is spoken.

This approach has proved especially challenging when teachers are called upon to teach in Spanish. Participating teachers say it is difficult to find materials appropriate to some themes in Spanish and also it is difficult to teach skills (in either language) when using a thematic approach.

Although the program does not specifically require any special classroom organization or management, all the participating teachers have aides. And they all say the aides – who are bilingual – are absolutely necessary. In addition, the program is operating in two sections in each grade; therefore, the teachers really must collaborate and creatively deploy their students to accommodate the split. This need for special classroom organizational and

management arrangements is more important as the program moves upward through the grades. Thus, the first grade teachers literally move their students from room to room as they shift the language of instruction – English only in one room, Spanish only in the other.

Staffing and staff development are crucial components of West Liberty's Dual Language program. Of the six teachers currently participating in the program, five are fully bilingual and one speaks only English. The aides are bilingual as well. There also is one full-time coordinator, and the Director of Special Projects estimates she spends 60% of her time on the program. As the program continues to expand, district leadership has tacitly added Spanish language fluency to its criteria for hiring.

In the early stages of adoption, participating teachers and administrators spent a lot of time (a "study year") doing research and visiting other places (notably Chicago and Milwaukee) where this kind of program operated. This is how they schooled themselves in dual language instruction and while on these visits many joined in professional development activities at the schools they were visiting in order to sharpen their own skills. The current program has no special professional development related to curriculum or instructional design associated with it, however. Teachers in the program engage in the same curriculum design and lesson development activities and opportunities as the rest of the staff. On the other hand, one participating teacher, uncomfortable with her level of Spanish proficiency, engaged in a Spanish language immersion experience during one summer, living with a family in Costa Rica. The district paid for this experience.

Because the program is grant-funded, the district keeps very close account of student impact data. This data clearly shows across-the-board positive results in key areas of leaning and achievement as measured, for example, by Iowa's 280.18 Assessments, the Iowa Test of Educational Development, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, and the IDEA-IPT tests for English and Spanish. Anecdotally, the Pre-K and K teachers point to a number of positive impacts the program has had on students. These include children "thinking" in their non-dominant language, children talking at home in the non-dominant language (especially Anglo children), increased, comfortable interaction between Hispanic and Anglo students, and of course increased fluency in the non-dominant language.

Part V: Elements of Success

As dissimilar and distant as these schools are from each other, looking at the success each experienced in establishing and carrying out individual improvement efforts one can see a number of underlying commonalties. With the caveat that they should not be seen as guideposts but rather as observations, the following elements seem to have played significant roles in these schools' successes. Interestingly, when these elements were brought to the attention of almost all individuals interviewed, nearly all acknowledged their importance. Yet for the most part, respondents had not considered these

elements as explicit influences. "We never thought of that," was a typical comment.

Culture Stressing Continuous Improvement, Reflection, and Self-Analysis

At all four schools staff and community members expressed a genuine commitment to improvement for the sake of the students. Northport and Dawson-Bryant respondents traced the genesis of their improvement efforts, at least in part, to ensuring their students would succeed in the next phases of their educational careers. In West Liberty they worried that the school was not responding aggressively enough to Hispanic students' learning needs. And at Federal-Hocking they worried that their school's climate was preventing them from creating the kind of learning environment they felt would help their students succeed.

Along with this commitment to improvement, however, there was a strong, pervasive willingness to look critically at what was going on in the school: what worked, what did not, what should be changed, what could be added, and what needed to be eliminated. In all four cases some combination of staff, board of education, and involved community members were following what seemed to be a long-standing tradition of self-analysis. As one respondent put it, "We've always thought it was important to see how we could do things better." And in all four cases the staff was committed to making improvements and in fact could point to a history of improvement efforts. More importantly, the community seemed cooperative and also anxious to keep improving things at the schools.

Culture Amenable to Change and Experimentation

Concomitant with this culture of self-analysis the staff at these schools was willingness on the part of the staff to make the necessary changes even if they involved some risk. In no case did there seem to be staff who were rigid, in denial about the need to change, or attempting to promote some other agenda. This does not mean that things were always wonderful for everyone. In all cases there were staff members who had to be convinced about the nature of certain changes and in one case staff actually rejected a number of proposed changes. Also, there are staff in at least three of the schools that still do not "buy in" to the changes. Yet when one examines the nature of the staff objections, all were related to legitimate differences in opinion about substantive, procedural, philosophical, or instructional issues. As one respondent put it, "We argue and fight and have to 'sell' each other every now and then, but it's usually just details."

The willingness to experiment and change extends to the communities where these schools are located as well. Again not every member of every board of education in these communities was (or is) one hundred percent supportive of every nuance of every change. Nor was every member of the community. It seems however, that objection and debate revolved around educational issues rather than political ones.

The only exception was the objection to the dual language program coming from a small contingent of "English only in our schools" proponents in West Liberty. Portrayed as "politically motivated," this group's efforts at stalling the program were not successful and with its successes they faded into the background.

Attention to Principles of Change

Either by plan or by instinct, those initiating and managing the changes that went along with the improvement efforts at these schools paid close attention to essential change principles. For example, in all cases great emphasis was placed on "involvement", "buy-in", "communication", "process", and the like. Whether the improvement initiatives were introduced from the top, from the grass roots, or from outside – all of which happened in different cases – those charged with making sure they were properly installed and implemented took great pains to make sure everyone at least knew what was happening. Where possible they tried to involve staff and community in planning and designing local implementation, as well as in fine-tuning.

Also, they paid close attention to the "vision thing", making sure they had a clear "big picture" view of what should happen and what would be the positive results. Likewise, they made sure everyone involved knew it and also knew when things were working well. In addition, they "worked the process," encouraging early adopters, providing them with additional resources and perks, and using them to develop the next set of adopters. They kept close tabs on these early adopters looking to them for reactions and suggestions for changes both to the improvement initiative and to the process itself. Lastly, they 'worked" the allies they had in school and out in the community, using them to explain, promote, and market the improvement efforts.

Solid Research

For these four places a school improvement initiative was selected and introduced only after extensive research had been done. School and district staff – sometimes in collaboration with the board of education or community representatives – not only analyzed themselves to determine what was needed to improve their instructional results, they also analyzed research literature, available programs, and even other instances of implementation. In every case however, the research started with an assessment of instructional effectiveness and needs.

Usually the staff itself carried out informal organizational audits and internal focus group discussions to discover what about their school climate was impeding student success and what they could do to improve. Occasionally they enlisted outside help to conduct a more formal investigation of what they might do to improve.

More than needs assessment though, in each case staff, and sometimes board of education and community members, did extensive research to determine exactly which improvement initiative would best suit both their specific needs and their particular school and community contexts. In all

cases this research – as well as the time to carry it out – was built explicitly into each school's and district's planning phase with some (West Liberty, Federal-Hocking, and Northport) spending an entire year doing research.

In this research segment of their planning phases, they reviewed literature, matched the literature against any available impact studies, did cost and benefit analyses, and in three cases (Federal-Hocking, Northport, and West Liberty), visited other places to gain practical guidance and experience. In West Liberty, Northport, and Federal-Hocking they also conducted survey and market research to find out where the community stood on the intended improvement initiatives. Additionally, they researched various adaptation options to determine how best to implement the improvement initiatives given the social and cultural environments of the schools and communities. Even today, all four schools and districts include provision for reflection, research, and continuing needs assessment in their improvement programs.

Local Adaptation

For nearly two decades, the change literature has stressed the importance that local adaptations play in program success (Corbett, et. al., 1989, Cuban, 1992, McDermott, 1997). The experiences of these four schools and districts are evidence that support this importance. In each case, those leading the improvement effort made adaptations to the programs they selected to ensure that they would answer their needs and also match well with their school and community context. Thus, every program put in place by these schools and districts was modified by the adopters, either prior to adoption or during the early phases of installation.

In some cases, for example in Northport and Federal-Hocking where they installed the *Coalition for Essential Schools* model, this adaptation was not very difficult to carry out. The model allows for flexibility. Yet even in the cases where the models seem fairly rigid and local adaptation is strongly discouraged or difficult to accomplish (i.e., those sites that chose *Success for All* or the dual language program chosen by West Liberty), the programs were modified. Sometimes, as in Northport, programs were adapted to make them "fit" with another improvement initiative (the Senior Project program). At other times adaptations were based on practical considerations of time, money, or staff skill levels, as when the dual language program was scaled back in West Liberty. And in still other instances, the adaptations came as a way to accommodate staff or community concern; for example the integration of *Reading Recovery* strategies into the *Success for All* program at Dawson-Bryant.

Added Resources

There is a prevailing myth in education that success is independent of resources; that money does not matter. For these four schools and districts, money did matter and it is unlikely that any of them would have been as successful had they not had additional resources. Both Ohio school districts received sizable Venture Capital grants from the state department of education along with special funding or in-kind contributions from other

sources. In West Liberty major funding for the dual language program came from a large Title VII grant. In Northport, besides being able to take advantage of the high level of tax revenue that comes with their location in an exclusive resort community, they had grant money coming from a federal, Comprehensive School Reform planning grant.

At base, without these additional resources the schools and districts would not have been able to devote the time they did to the critical self-analysis, research investigation, and planning activities that preceded installation of their improvement initiatives. Additional resources also enabled them to fund essential, but costly, staff development activities. These resources paid for technical assistance and for extra supplies, support staff, and "perks" that kept teachers enthusiastic and motivated to continue. These extra resources made it possible for these districts to market and promote their efforts to teachers and community members. Finally and most importantly, the additional resources these districts and schools received insured that they could make long-term investments in their improvement initiatives. They had enough money to fund several years and this ability to fund, therefore maintain, a multi-year effort allowed them to wait a reasonable amount of time to show positive impact.

Part VI: The Role of the Rural Context

It is safe to say that the success factors outlined above could apply to schools in any context. Yet as the observers and interviewers collecting data surely will attest, these schools' successes could be traced in large measure to their rural context. Certainly, being classified as "rural", being small, or being relatively poor – all often cited as typical rural school attributes -- was beneficial for these schools' improvement successes. There are other, less obvious factors of the rural context, however, that had a positive effect on these programs.

Rural, Poor, and Small

The fact that these schools are in rural locations and that three of them also are resource poor provided a real boost as all moved through the life cycles of their improvement initiatives. As "poor" rural districts, two of the four were eligible for special consideration by federal and state grant-making agencies. And all four schools received grant money that enabled them to acquire extra resources that they used for the -- sometimes sizable --extra costs associated with school improvement. Among the extras they used this money for were extensive research, site visits, materials, substitutes, professional development, and technical assistance. Moreover, those that adopted model the programs, *Success for All* and *Coalition of Essential Schools*, received special attention from the developers who were anxious to show they were serving rural, poor populations.

Small size was an additional plus. All four school districts are small both geographically and in terms of number of students. The communities where they are located likewise are relatively small. With few students and staff

members these schools could keep up a fast pace as they moved their improvements through their life cycles. Fewer had to buy in, adopt, and implement for fewer students. With small size comes a small – or non-existent -- administrative superstructure, which usually translates into fewer bureaucratic requirements, check points, and thus roadblocks. Therefore the improvement programs the schools adopted moved rather quickly from the planning stages to implementation and institutionalization. For example, it took Federal Hocking just a little more than a year to go from planning to fully implementing their block schedule.

Small size also allowed them to show significant impact quickly. When nearly ten percent of the total district teaching force (six teachers out of sixty-six) show measurable literacy, reading, and writing gains among ninety-six percent of all students in a program, as was the case in West Liberty, most every other teacher takes notice. Parents take notice too.

Rural Insecurity

There also were more subtle influences of rural context at work as these schools planned, implemented, and institutionalized their improvement initiatives. One such subtle influence that seemed to exist for all four cases has to do with a kind of uneasiness expressed by staff and community that these rural schools do not "measure up" when compared to suburban or urban schools. Northport is a good example of how this uneasiness worked as a motivator as they installed their various improvement initiatives.

One of the first things one hears from the Northport staff is that their students are very successful. When asked how many Northport students graduate, the principal answered, "They all do." When asked how many go to post-secondary schools, his answer was the same; then he began reciting an impressive list of colleges Northport's graduates have attended. He went on to note they have been sending their children to this caliber of school for decades. Yet at a different time, when asked why Northport felt it necessary to introduce the Senior Projects program and become a *Coalition of Essential Schools* site, he replied, "We didn't think our students were prepared well enough for college. We felt we needed to help them measure up better to the urban and suburban kids."

His sentiment – and the sentiment of nearly all the people interviewed in all four sites – was that partly due to their rural context, these schools were not as good as suburban or urban schools. Their programs were not as rich and they were not preparing their students as well as schools in other contexts. This insecurity in part led them to feel a need to improve. In some cases this sentiment was based on hard facts as at Dawson-Bryant and West Liberty. In other cases, like Northport, it was as much perception as fact. We talked to several graduates of Northport School who also had graduated from college and they thought their local school did a fine job of preparing them.

Whether well-founded or not, this uneasiness that their rural schools are somehow inferior to urban or suburban ones acted as a motivator for the educators and community to begin the process of improvement. Moreover,

proving they could "measure up" became a challenge that gave both the school and the community the determination and persistence to make the improvement initiatives succeed. This challenge also gave them a set of common goals.

Integration of School and Community

The ability of the schools and their communities to agree upon and take action to meet common goals gets at still another influence of the rural context. In the Midwest, rural people have a long tradition of pulling together to help each other out. It is how barns got raised and cooperatives got established. It is based in the belief that the community has a responsibility to the individual – and vice versa. From this belief spring a good number of the values seen in the rural Midwest. One such value is that there is an important, even vital link between the community as a whole and certain community institutions. For many rural Midwesterners, the school is the most critical rural community institution. In some ways it comes to symbolize the community itself. "When the school goes, the community dies," is a commonly heard lament in Midwestern rural communities.

In his landmark study, *Growing Up American*, Peshkin (1978) examined this linkage as it manifested itself in rural Illinois. There he observed what he calls "the integral relationship between school and community in a rural area" (p. 8). He noted that when talking to people living in the rural Illinois community he studied, they often used the notion of school, of school district, and of community almost interchangeably. Peshkin saw this phenomenon as an indication of a highly integrated – even intimate – interrelationship among these entities. This kind of integration can be seen in each of our four rural places; and it played a positive role in their school improvement initiatives.

For example, the school buildings themselves are seen by community members to be physical landmarks. Geographically they serve as focal points. They are "right there," as one West Liberty parent put it, meaning they are highly visible, sometimes the largest, most prominent structures in the community. In some of the communities you really cannot go anywhere without seeing or passing a school building. In West Liberty the three schools are spread across town and the Northport School is on a rise overlooking the town. Likewise, from an economic point of view, these rural school districts are dominant economic focal points in their communities. The two Ohio schools are the major employer and the Northport and West Liberty school districts are important regional employers.

These schools also sometimes are community social and cultural focal points. In Northport, the school is an all-purpose facility and a kind of central gathering place. Besides K-12 students and teachers, it houses the district administrators and serves as the home for a wide range of community events that are both educational (adult basic education classes) and semi-educational (summer camps, aerobics, or art classes). It also has been used as a place for non-educational community activities such as dances or meetings. At Dawson-Bryant the school serves as a branch office of the

regional mental health services and as a base camp for the yearly community charity drive.

As the institutional distinctions between school and community blur, rural communities make more than just an educational investment in the schools. They devote the same amount of energy, enthusiasm, and emotion as they do to the community itself. The schools become a source of community pride and sometimes come to symbolize the community's values and way of life (Swindler, forthcoming). It doesn't take long in a Midwestern rural community before one knows how well the school's sports or debate teams did in the state. It doesn't take long to find out how many students went to elite colleges, either. As the investment broadens, maintaining quality schools becomes a community goal (Howley, 1997) and typically rural communities in the Midwest engage themselves aggressively in this goal.

In these four rural school districts this investment in school success (leading to student success) created allegiances to the schools that superceded social, economic, and even ethnic allegiances. When the educators in these communities said their programs were designed to benefit all students, they meant it. More significantly, the results of the initiatives they installed show it.

This integration of rural school and rural community and the investment that results from it could be seen on a more human level in the four communities, as well. Generally, in rural communities there isn't much of a line separating the school people from the rest of the community members. People who work in rural schools very often live in the communities where the school is located. They socialize with other community members, do business in the community, and consciously take advantage of what the community has to offer.

In our four cases most of the educators were also community members. We could see them walking to schools – sometimes with their own children -- and getting coffee and doughnuts on their way at the local café on their way. At school we met their children walking through the halls. In the evenings we saw them eating dinner at the local restaurant and sitting through school plays. And of course we saw them and their families at basketball and football games as players, coaches, officials, and spectators. We were sort of surprised to find how many had been raised in these communities or nearby and how many had spouses who were from the community.

With this kind of school/community integration on all these levels, the educators in these four rural communities were not bogged down by the institutional, economic, professional, distance or social barriers between themselves and their community that often exist in suburban or urban schools. Without these barriers social interaction and professional interaction were mixed and informal but essential communication occurred continuously. In all four cases this interaction and communication had a definite impact on the improvement initiatives because it facilitated the engagement of the community in these initiatives.

The school people were emphatic that being themselves members of their rural community was a huge plus for facilitating their aggressive efforts to build community support and buy-in. It gave them more opportunity to sell their ideas and to do market testing to see how these ideas might be received and how they should be modified. In three cases – West Liberty, Northport, and Federal Hocking – the school people were convinced they would have had trouble even getting the initiatives off the ground if they had not been able to interact with community members person-to-person.

Once they established community commitment to the improvement initiatives the school people again relied on their status as community members to make sure the initiatives were meeting student and parent needs. They took advantage of every formal and informal interaction to keep the community aware of what was happening. They took pains to always be aware of what community members liked and didn't. After a time, they ceased having to ask to find out what the community thought or what they wanted from their schools. Additionally, their status as community members as well as educators made it is easier for them to see (and hear) how what they were doing affected children's lives. Seeing the students and their parents in a wide variety of social situations allowed the educators in these four communities to keep track of particular student's needs. Thus the educators from these four rural communities could engage community members beyond simple buy-in and endorsement by consciously giving them a planning and development role: seeking their assessments, getting them to pinpoint needs, and asking for their guidance.

In all four communities the school people were quick to point out the value this community engagement had for their initiatives' successes. It led to broad consensus in the school and in the community about what the school improvement initiatives should do, be, and become. Furthermore, it facilitated the mobilization of resources, energies, and personal investment – again among both the school people and the community members – around these goals. And it worked to keep school and community involved in doing what they needed to do to meet the goals. Significantly, teachers and administrators also noted this deeper engagement caused them to feel a strong, almost personal, responsibility to make sure the initiatives succeeded lest they let down the community. There were community members who said they felt the same way.

Part VII: How on Earth Did You Hear About Us?

Our site investigations were not the first time the programs in these schools had been looked at and studied. These schools and their school improvement initiatives are very well known and all the districts have experienced a fairly large amount of attention and spotlight over the years. Northport is well promoted by the *Coalition of Essential Schools* statewide and nationally. Both Federal-Hocking and Dawson-Bryant have had books written about them and the latter is frequently highlighted in *Success for All* research summaries. West Liberty has itself become a stop for schools wanting to learn how to

implement a dual language program and the state department of education considers it a model district for such an initiative.

Yet nearly all the people we spoke with in these four communities expressed surprise that anyone would want to study them. In fact, in West Liberty during our interviews with them, teachers kept asking us how on earth we heard about them and why we thought they were worth studying. They were almost oblivious to just how remarkable what they are doing is. The sentiment was the same in all four school districts; none thought their efforts were much of a big deal. They saw what they were doing as rural school people see nearly everything extraordinary they do: as simply doing what needs to be done to help the kids and the community succeed.

This makes me think that this may be why we don't have more examples, like these, of successful rural schools that have done the extraordinary. They are there in the Midwest and all across the country; we know they are, but maybe they feel they are just doing what needs to be done – nothing extraordinary, no big deal. And their humility about their remarkable accomplishments is keeping their wisdom, expertise, and experience from others who really could use it.

For us as researchers of rural education, therefore, I have only this recommendation: When you find these rural places where they're doing the remarkable and you write about them, share what you write with others and especially with other rural places. This might inspire and guide them so they can do the remarkable, too.

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APPENDIX

Data Collection Guide and Rubrics

Section I: Demographic Information

Contact Person(s)

District Name

School Name

Address

Telephone

FAX

E-mail

Degree of Rurality (Description and ERS Code)

Degree of Remoteness (Distance to ERS Code 7 location)

Buildings

Student Enrollment and Teaching Staff

Grade	# of Students	# of Teachers	# of Sections	# of NTAs (Pd & Vol.)

Administration

Position	Role

Degree of Poverty (# students receiving free and reduced lunch)

Section II: Program Information

A. General Program Description

- Brief description

- Needs addressed

- Research basis

- Implementation timeline & benchmarks

Which students included

Grade/Group	# of Students	Amount of time spent in program

- Standards addressed

- Evidence of impact

B. Important Program Elements

- Philosophy & Goals
- Curriculum
- Instruction
- Classroom Organization
- Assessment Objectives & Outcome Measures
- School Organization
- Professional Development
- Parent Involvement
- Staffing

C. Important Program Personnel & Roles

Personnel	# in Program	Role(s) in Program	Amount of time devoted to Program	Comments
Central Office				
Building Administrators				
Teachers				
NTAs				
Other Staff				
Parents and Community				
State, Regional, Local Technical Assistance				

D. Costs by Item & Sources of Funds

Section III: Interview and Document Review Question Path

Decision -- How were program decisions reached?

1. Needs Identification -- How did the initiative get started?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What caused the school/community/board of education to consider making changes?
   - Who identified the needs and how?
   - Was the assessment formal or informal?
   - Was there consensus? How reached?

2. Gap Analysis -- What is the program supposed to do?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What gaps does this program seek to narrow?
   - How did you decide exactly what to change?
   - Who made this decision and how?

3. Program Selected -- Why this program?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What different programs did you consider before settling on this one?
   - Who did the research?
   - What were the pluses and minuses of the different programs?
   - What were the criteria for review? Formal? Informal?
   - Why did you pick this particular program?
   - How was selection made?
   - Was there consensus? How reached?
   - Was program adapted? How?

4. Buy-In -- How much support for the program?

   Sample probe questions:
   - How were the need and the program "sold?"
   - What is level and nature of buy-in?
   - How did buy-in occur?

Planning -- How did implementation planning occur? What are components of the plan?

1. Structure, Organization, and Process -- How is planning set up?

   Sample probe questions:
   - Who is responsible for planning?
   - How and why were they selected for this task?
   - What are their incentives for participation?
   - What are their specific responsibilities
   - How does planning occur? Time? Place? Agendas?
   - How do planners interact with leadership? With rest of staff?

2. Product(s) -- What is the nature of the plan that guides implementation?

   Sample probe questions:
   - How was plan written?
   - What is plan?
   - How specific is plan? Outcomes? Benchmarks? Timeline? Activities? Responsibilities? Evaluation?
   - Does plan include vision/mission statement?
   - How was vision/mission written?
   - How was consensus reached? How were vision & plan "sold?"

Implementation -- How was program introduced and carried out?

1. Early Adoption -- How were the first stages of implementation carried out?

   Sample probe questions:
   - Who were first adopters?
   - How were they selected? What were their incentives?
   - Did the composition of this group change? How? Why?
   - What were their responsibilities?
   - How closely did they follow program and implementation plan?
   - What did they modify? Why?

2. Initial Results -- What happened as a result of first stages of implementation?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What was the impact of implementation on:
     - Target audience?
     - First adopters?
     - Others?
     - Program?
     - Program costs?
     - Implementation process and plan?
   - How close to expectations?

3. Revision -- What changed as a result of first stage implementation?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What revisions were made to the program? Why?
   - What revisions were made to implementation plan and process? Why?
   - Who is responsible for revisions?

Widespread Implementation and Institutionalization -- How was program spread and what happened?

1. Structure, Organization, and Plan -- How is dissemination plan set up?

   Sample probe questions:
   - Who is responsible for dissemination planning? How selected?
   - What is dissemination plan? How developed? (See also probe questions for Planning Product above.)
   - Is there a distinction between dissemination and institutionalization? (NOTE: Institutionalization is defined as the point at which implementation of program components has become routine and implementers consider program as standard operating procedure)

2. Widespread Implementation -- How was dissemination carried out?

   Sample probe questions:
   - Who were next sets of adopters?
   - How were they selected? What were their incentives?
   - How closely did they follow program and dissemination plan?
   - What did they modify? Why?

3. Results of Widespread Implementation -- What happened as a result of dissemination?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What was the impact of widespread implementation on:
     - Target audience?
     - First adopters?
     - Others?
     - Program?
     - Program costs?
     - Dissemination process and plan?
   - How close to expectations?
   - Has widespread implementation resulted in institutionalization? (NOTE: Institutionalization is defined as the point at which implementation of program components has become routine and implementers consider program as standard operating procedure)
     - At what level?
     - How many staff?

Influence of Rural Context -- What uniquely rural characteristics of the school, district, or community contributed to the program's success?

1. What role do the rural characteristics play generally?

   Sample probe questions:
   - What about your school, district, and community would you describe as typically rural?
   - Which of these has an impact on school and district operations?
     - Are they negative or positive influences?

2. What role did these characteristics play in any of the things talked about so far (e.g., How program decisions were reached? Program implementation. Program institutionalization, etc.)